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Puts Bennett Freeze in the past

BLACK FALLS, Ariz. – President Jonathan Nez, Vice President Myron Lizer, and newly appointed Executive Director for the Navajo Hopi Land Commission Office, Robert K. Black, Jr., held an open meeting to listen to issues and concerns from local residents at the Black Falls Church, in the area commonly known as the Former Bennett Freeze Area, Feb. 12.

The majority of elderly Navajo people in attendance continue to be impacted by the Bennett Freeze, which restricted any new development or improvements to 1.5 million acres of land that was in dispute between the Navajo Nation and Hopi Tribe, and was imposed by the federal government in 1966. The freeze was in place for 43 years before being lifted in 2009.

Tuesday's meeting marked the first official visit to the area since Nez took office in January. In his opening remarks, he delivered a message of hope and empowerment while also taking several hours to listen to local resident,s share their concerns over homesite leases, housing, water and power lines, uranium contamination, emergency assistance for veterans, land boundaries, and economic opportunities.

"Many of the people of this area have lived in dilapidated homes with no electricity or running water, but yet they are resilient and continue to live good lives," Nez said. "We don't want these meetings to occur just once a year, but we want to meet with the residents on a regular basis

and show results and progress."

He also encouraged everyone in attendance to stop referring to the communities as the "Former Bennett Freeze Area," due to the negative connotation associated with the former Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Robert Bennett, who is responsible for signing the order to impose the freeze on development in 1966.

"It's because of this person that this occurred, so we should not continue to use his name to represent our communities, but we should refer to this area as an empowerment area with great potential for development and prosperity," Nez added.

Nez and Lizer told residents that they are aware that many studies and assessments have already been completed and that the time to take action is now. "

"This area has been over-studied and I think we all know what the problems are, but now is the time to create solutions and work together to improve our communities," Nez said. "We might not have all the answers for you, and that's why we need your help and your input."

Approximately 60 local residents attended the meeting and spoke about their family histories, challenges encountered, and their recommendations to resolve issues. Nez committed to visiting with the residents on a regular basis and providing updates and reports from division directors and other agencies to keep the public informed.

The meeting also offered the communities an opportunity to meet Robert K. Black, Jr., who was appointed in January to serve as the Executive Director for the Navajo Hopi Land Commission Office. The Nez-Lizer administration thanked everyone for attending the meeting and offering support for the initiatives.

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